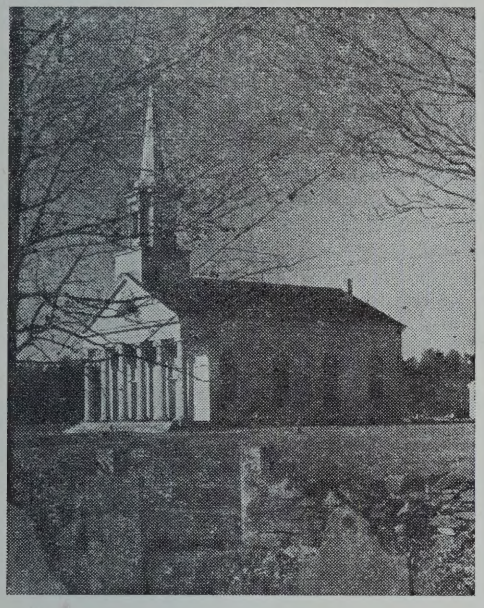
The Middleborough Antiquarian

Devoted to the preservation of local history by

MIDDLEBOROUGH HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, INC.

Established 1922

VOLUME IV | APRIL 1962 | NUMBER II



Rev. Sylvanus Conant Pastor of the First Congregational Church Society from 1745 to 1777. The present Church building at the Green was built in 1828.

THE FORGOTTEN PATRIOT

The bleak, cold winter of 1777 brought tragedy to many Middleborough families and to the community itself when smallpox struck. For the death of the Rev. Sylvanus Conant brought to an end the life of a man who had been much more to the town than the fourth pastor of First Church.

It was the Rev. Conant's destiny to come to the Middleborough parish at a most crucial time in the history of the town and the Colonies. A graduate of Harvard College, he came to a town where loyalty to the crown was deep seated; a loyalty which in no small part must be credited to the influence of Judge Oliver, not to overlook the fact that the people who lived here were Englishmen before they became Americans. Many had relatives in England and the roots of sentiment stretched across an ocean to the mother country. Few, if any, could find fault, had they time to think about it, with the administration of the Colonies.

So the Rev. Conant came to a town where the man who was later to be branded a Tory and would abandon his estate and flee to England, still was a respected and important man in this community's social and industrial life.

The Rev. Conant brought with him an unquenchable flame of patriotism, not for a distant monarch, but for freedom from ties with England. He championed freedom from his pulpit fearlessly, and with deep conviction that it was the inevitable course the people of this young country must take. From the foregoing, it seems reasonable to assume that this position might not have been without peril.

However, the Rev. Conant persisted. He won support. In fact, when the war finally started, thirty-five members of his church enlisted and the militant pastor himself served one of the regiments as chaplain.

What dangers he faced are not known, but it is recorded that he returned to Middleborough and fell victim in his 58th year to smallpox, at that time a disease more deadly than war, for it struck young and old impartially. Sadly, the key to a serum which would check this scourge was almost within the grasp of an English scientist, when the Rev. Conant and many of his parishioners perished in local pest houses.

It is also regrettable that the passage of time stifles the breath of reality when writing about someone like the Rev. Conant. It becomes difficult to present the image of a living man. We cannot hear his voice reading the New Testament in the church, or its vibrant urging in the cause of freedom. We cannot look into his eyes. He is long gone, and we fear, forgotten. He and eight of his parishioners lie beneath a row of mouldering headstones in a lonely place not far from where they lived. The little burial plot lies just off Soule Street, where it is joined by Brook Street. There is little traffic on either road and no one, even in winter when it can be seen while driving by, ever stops except perhaps out of idle curiosity. Our hope is that someday the interest of townfolk in their historic background will bring to the Rev. Conant the recognition he should have.

Clint Clark

SPRING MEETING

Monday, April 2, 1962

Junior High School Musicorium, 8 P. M.

Speaker:

RICHARD A. BOURNE of Hyannisport, Mass.

Subject: Antiques, auctions and collecting.

You are invited and urged to bring to the meeting antique items for identification and possible evaluation. A question and answer period and discussion will follow his talk.

Members and their friends, and all Friends of the Museum are urged to attend.

In the Business meeting, which will be a short one, the Association will be asked to approve a motion to authorize the Board of Directors to make an amendment to the Articles of Incorporation or to the By-Laws, to comply with a requirement of the Internal Revenue Service in order to continue our qualification for exemption of contributions made to the Association, on income tax returns.

MUSEUM NEWS

One of the most exciting, yet one of the dirtiest experiences is exploring through old buildings and in old attics. The discarded treasures found are almost as good as buried treasure and well worth the dirt one has to contend with. Everyone here in town can either remember the old Peirce general store or has heard and read stories about it. Before the snows came last month, a small group of society members were working on the wing of the second house on Jackson Street making ready our general store. Thinking maybe some things from the old store might have been put over the court house when the building was remodeled, two of us decided to take a look. The second floor yielded the old counters and a section of grain bins; the prices are still marked inside with chalk. As if finding these wasn't enough, we piled tables, boxes, and chairs up to get into the attic. It was just full of things from the old store! There was an old door, two of the original shutters, several ancient cracker barrels with the wooden hoops, dozens of "new" plow parts, a large seed box, and a dozen old shipping boxes with the name "Peter H. Peirce Store" and the address stamped on the covers. All of these things, worthless to a lot of people, will be valuable to us in reconstructing a village store at the museum. We also found a handful of old nails over the judge's chamber. They look to be between 100 and 150 years old.

Also in connection with the store we are outfitting, two layers of flooring have been torn up exposing the old, wide boards and the hearth in the wing. Between the floors, an 1893 Indian head penny was found. Possibly that was the year the second floor was laid.

From an old farm at the Rock came an oak plow (circa 1820) for our collection of antique farming implements. Also, there came a Victorian sofa which is one of the first pieces we have of that period. Several weeks later we acquired another very ornate Victorian piece—a whatnot with five shelves. Other acquisitions are an organ and some music books, a tin bath-tub with handles on either side, a sled with wheels, two shelf clocks, a stack of postcards picturing old Middleborough parades, a chromo-lithograph of the old steamer Assawompsett on the lake, a pine kitchen table which has two drop leaves, and other small miscellaneous items. One of our rarest and most historically valuable gifts was a carton of old books going back even farther than the settling of Plymouth. The oldest of the group was published in England in 1587.

We would like to thank HISTORY NEWS for the fine report of progress and we greatly appreciate getting the bulletins, pamphlets, and catalogues from other historical societies, not just in Massachusetts, but from all over New England and the country. They keep us informed of the progress others are making, and it gives us a chance to compare our efforts with those of neighboring organizations. When our library room is finished in the summer, all of these exchanges will be available for everyone to read and enjoy.

Too, we'd like to thank the MIDDLEBOROUGH GAZETTE and the H. L. Thatcher Company for lending us cuts used in the last issue of the "Antiquarian" and those shown in this issue.

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OUR ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE

There is something lasting and good in an old house. There is something excellent about the atmosphere of an old place that defies imitation.

Middleborough was once a town with an abundance of such dwellings. Some like the Peter Oliver estate or the Peter Peirce house were stately; others, the majority, were of a simple and honest structure. Designed and built perhaps by a farmer for his family, a house was the place a simple, God-fearing family could enjoy each other and the quiet pace of living in rural America. Generations were born, married, and given funerals in those houses where there was always a mixture of joy and sorrow, laughter and tears. Every nick, scratch, and gouge in that building was part of the romance of history—part of a family.

Perhaps built by great-grandfather or some other ancestor more than a century before, a house was once respected and even loved. The hand-hewn timbers and carved panelling represented back-breaking hours of labor and the sweat of a hard-working man. A house was a monument of one man's love of a combination of beauty and endurance. It was truly a home.

Times have changed drastically. The houses today are quite different. While early buildings had the best of materials and the finest workmanship, those of today are many times just a product of a type of mass production. Somehow they lack the warmth and charm, the peacefulness of an old house. The gracious, yet staunch and sturdy home of early Massachusetts will never be replaced.

Old houses are a very important part of history. They are the best tangible links with a past that America has always been proud of. Then doesn't it make sense to preserve them? Because it is inevitable that fire and storm will destroy a certain number of these old places, we, as intelligent, history-minded people, should make an effort to help preserve the few we have left.

One by one these tangible links or examples of living history have been forced aside by what is commonly called "progress." Only a few years ago that stately old home on the corner of North Main and Peirce Streets was razed, and as it came down piece by piece, day by day, everyone shook his head sadly at what they thought was something about which nothing could be done. It was this house where Professor J. W. P. Jenks lived. When he became the principal of Peirce Academy in 1842 it was barely struggling along. He built it and its reputation up so that in 1850 it was necessary to sell the old academy building and have it moved away to make room for a more spacious school. And later it was necessary to make several more additions to that building. Through hard work and self sacrifice, Professor Jenks made Middleborough a leader in the field of education. His students were reputed to be the best equipped of men and women in the whole state. Now what do we have to remember this man who helped make our town's school system one of the finest and who set standards that have never been lowered? His proud and austere house with its sunken and terraced gardens has been replaced by a chain store and a gas station. This house should have been preserved, not just as a memorial to a community leader, but also to a style of architecture—a strange combination of simplicity and elegance. The academy he built up was replaced by a modern brick post office. Besides a page in Weston's history, our only reminders of the Professor Jenks are a cradle and a few other small articles at the museum.

Of great architectural and historical importance to Middleborough was the old hostelry, the Nemasket House. Its high tapered columns and lacy ironwork on the balcony once lent a certain air to a town where our landmarks have a habit of vanishing like puddles in the bright sun. Not only was the construction itself valuable, but how educational it would be to have those old ledgers, account books, and the register! But this building which was a temporary home to so many through its hundred and some odd years made way for another gas station and a parking lot. What have we left to remind us of the Nemasket House? Two black and gold signs, and memories; not even a paragraph in the history of the town.

Within just five years many structures near the center of the town have gone down. Although they had stood for nearly two centuries, the last three houses on Jackson Street were bulldozed to a premature death, for they collapsed unwillingly and with an uncanny struggle to remain, not really weary of the town they watched grow from much earlier days. Of course, not all unfortunate buildings have been houses. There were the Peirce barns and the shingled building on Jackson Street where the Nemasket Bottling Works got its start. Many other old barns put together with the mortise and tenon joints and sheds with wavy, imperfect windowpanes, and drafty outhouses have been wrecked or just neglected and left to decay on their stone foundations until they crumbled into oblivion.

We are like ignorant people burning our bridges behind us. It will be too late when the townspeople wake up and see how valuable these bridges are; they can never be reconstructed. We are like the man who rips the wild grapevines down from out of the trees after they have been stripped of the fruit. Those old vines will never grow back and drape and beautify his trees again, much less give fruit and shade. He will miss them in another year.

It is fortunate that as many old places have been bought and restored by interested people, though. Instead of remembering and thinking about what has slipped through our fingers, let's look to what could be saved. There is the Matthew Cushing house on Wareham Street. It is a commanding, pleasant looking place of two and a half stories, just full of old panelling and moldings, of fireplaces and graceful charm. It is slated to be demolished, and ironically enough, it will cost almost as much (including money and materials salvaged) to raze it as it would to get a good start on the restoration; and in my opinion an old home properly restored is more impressive than a hundred formal gardens. Why don't more people protest the demolition of these old buildings; why do people wait until it's too late to say anything? To be rather trite, it's like locking the barn after the horse has been stolen.

How wonderful it would be to have the Sproat Tavern at the Green. Benjamin Franklin, who was a frequent guest at Peter Oliver's, met there one Sunday afternoon and talked with the local farmers concerning their crops and the best way to enrich and drain their land. The barn where the travellers' horses were stabled for the night still stands. The five-seated outhouse stands too. It has been offered to us, but as yet no one has moved it for us.

Daniel Webster once said that the First Church at the Green was one of the finest he had ever seen. We are fortunate to have this magnificant example of early architectural workmanship, but several times fires from the town dump have come perilously close to the edifice. Apparently the town isn't interested in moving the dump because a small group has brought the question up several times and no action was ever taken. I can predict that the dump will be moved—it won't be until the damage has been done, of course, but it will be done like everything else in this community—sometime. Take a good look at the picture on the front cover. If you like what you see, and if it inspires you to do something to protect it, write in to the town manager demanding that the dump be relocated. If enough people do this we may get some action. Anything is worth trying when such a building is at stake. That is foresight—working with what we have and looking into the future with our past in mind.

The Lincoln Blacksmith Shop on the corner of Wareham and Lincoln Streets.

TWICE-TOLD TALES OF OLD MIDDLEBOROUGH

Years back, blacksmithing (now almost a lost art) was of vital importance to every community. Of the many which were located here in town at different times, the Lincoln shop pictured here was one. During the Civil War the Lincolns made their money in their blacksmith, wheelwright, and harness shops. Very often carts and wagons to be repaired could be seen lined from the corner of Wareham and Lincoln Streets almost up to the four corners. At the same time the horses might be waiting to be shod and the harness to be mended.

The Lincolns owned quite an extensive amount of land. They owned property at Everett Square and on Everett Street. They owned a house on Lincoln Street, five houses and the three shops on Wareham Street, and a barber shop on Center Street. They pastured their cows on land located somewhere between the varnish works on East Grove Street and the traffic lights. Of the many barefooted country lads that had to drive the bossies behind what is now a very residential South Main Street, one became a a lawyer here in town.

Everett Lincoln will be remembered for the large curls, which he was so proud of—two on top and one big one on the back of his head. He insisted that his cooking be done according to Miss Rohrer whose cookbook was apparently the last word in cooking at the time. It is amusing to know that no matter who was in for dinner, when the Mrs. told him to say a blessing, he always said, "Christ's sakes, Jesus' sakes. Amen." And I hear that once when Mrs. Lincoln told a friend that they planned to put in a bathtub, she confided that maybe they wouldn't use it, but all the better people were having them. It's strange nowadays to think of the bathtub as a status symbol. (I have it on authority that they did use it despite Mrs. Lincoln's uncertainty.)

Between the Lincoln's and the center of town Rodney Southworth had a paint shop in the old Sparrow building. Downstairs he kept and mixed his paints. Outdoors there was a ramp up the side of the building where the wagons and carriages were hauled up. The reason for taking them to the second floor was to prevent dust from the street from spoiling the painter's work. Mr. Southworth's son Bert did the fancy painting such as the loaves of bread that were put on the bakery carts.

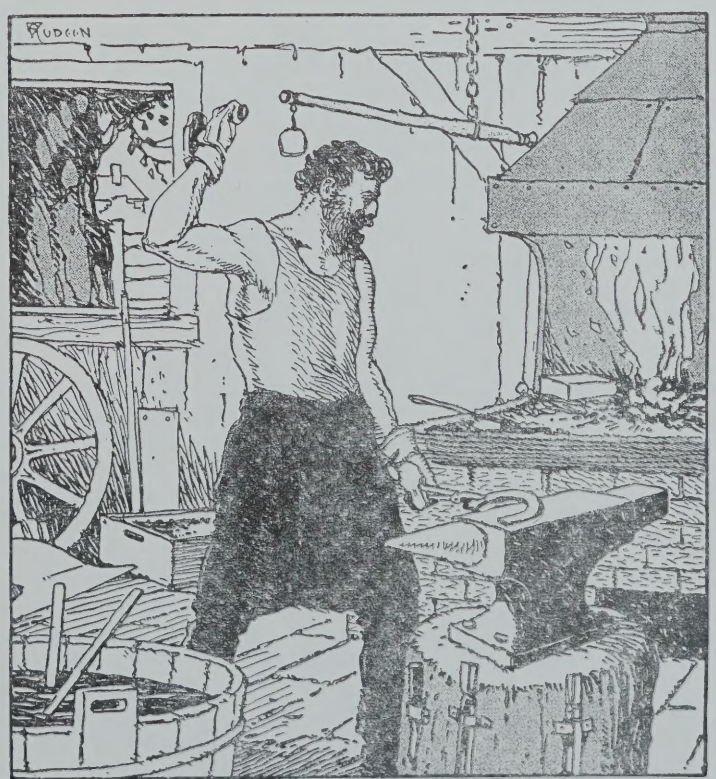
Nowadays things change rapidly from day to day, so just think of the many changes that have taken place since 1906. It was during that year that one of the policemen on the town's force told a woman strolling down the street to go home and change into decent clothes; her skirt was split. I understand that the split went clear up as far as her ankle! Imagine how embarrassed the poor policeman must have been!

Remember Pete Ramsey's barber shop on Center Street? (The one Mr. Lincoln owned.) I wish I could have had all those rows of shaving mugs that were lined up in there. The barber chairs in that shop are said to be the ones used at Boutin's now.

And can you remember the theater on Center Street where you saw the movies for only a dime? The seats were so close together that your knees touched the chair in front. They were just common folding chairs anyway, but the Perils of Pauline and the piano playing of Florence Bennett were enough to make you forget any uncomfortable position. Middleborough certainly was a mecca of culture back in the good old days. Besides the movies, the senior play, and the band concerts, every so often a troupe of actors and actresses would come to town and perform on a Friday and Saturday night in the town house. I think the admission was usually a quarter.

Besides the entertainment provided in Middleborough there were the Brockton Fairs, or one could go on the electric cars to Lakeside Park for dancing, or to the country fairs at Camp Joe Hooker to cheer the harness racers on. The fun was good and wholesome and yet inexpensive in those days. A dollar went a long way and was appreciated a lot more then.

There is one thing I would like to straighten out. I have heard that when Count Magri got older he used to chase women on the streets at night. With such miniature legs I doubt if he ever caught anyone; maybe he felt he was protecting them (by chasing them home where they belonged). Whatever the reason, can anyone verify this story?



Our blacksmith shop at the museum will be in the east room under the first house on Jackson Street. The floor and walls are brick; the beamed ceiling is exposed. Because of the fireplace down there it seems the most logical place to start collecting blacksmith tools. At this time the only thing we have is a four-foot bellows. We would greatly appreciate having an anvil, old water tubs, and even a smithy's leather apron given to us to help complete this project. Don't throw away any old wagon wheels, or iron rims or horseshoes—bring them to Jackson Street and throw them down the south bulkhead entry. We will be able to shoe Shetland ponies and small goat carts—just bring them in the drive between the two museum houses—but no automobiles, please. The blacksmith in charge will be glad to mend household ironware dating before the Civil War, but not any of this modern stuff made of steel alloys. Incidentally, one of our smiths who learned his trade at Westport still has the wrought turn-key that used to serve the community before the Revolution—you don't get it? In those days the blacksmith was the dentist too; if you had a toothache he extracted it for you in no uncertain terms—for thrupence (threepence).

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THE FRUGAL HOUSEWIFE

In 1830 a book called THE FRUGAL HOUSEWIFE came out full of "hints to persons of moderate fortune" and "dedicated to those who are not ashamed of economy." In this book the home-maker is told how to conserve and make good use of odd scraps of materials and food and extra minutes of time. Among other things this handy guide tells how to furnish a home, educate a daughter, cure a cancer, make soap, bake an apple pie, and pickle Nasturtium seeds. Although I don't think many of the following suggestions will be taken seriously by modern housewives, they are entertaining.

"In this country, we are apt to let children romp away their existence, till they get to be thirteen or fourteen. This is not well. It is not well for the purses and patience of parents; and it has a still worse effect on the morals and habits of the children." Times have changed, wouldn't you say?

"Children can very early be taught to take all the care of their own clothes. They can knit garters, suspenders, and stockings; they can make patchwork and braid straw; they can make mats for the table, and mats for the floor; they can weed the garden, and pick cranberries from the meadow, to be carried to market." A few lines later the author says, "It is a great deal better for the boys and girls on a farm to be picking blackberries at six cents a quart, than to be wearing out their clothes in useless play. They enjoy themselves just as well; and they are earning something to buy clothes, at the same time they are tearing them."

Among the odd scraps for the economical, the thrifty writer advises, "Look frequently to the pails, to see that nothing is thrown to the pigs which should have been in the grease-pot. Look to the grease-pot, and see that nothing is there which might have served to nourish your family, or a poorer one.

"When ivory-handled knives turn yellow, rub them with nice sand paper or emery; it will take off the spots, and restore their whiteness.

"When a carpet is faded it may be restored by dipping it into strong salt and water." Another means of coloring materials was with an ox's gall. "When one lives near a slaughterhouse, it is worth while to buy cheap, fading goods, and color them with the ox's gall. The gall can be bought for a few cents. Get out all the liquid, and cork it up in a large phial. One large spoonful of this in a gallon of warm water is sufficient for coloring the faded goods."

Of all these hints none of them compares with this: "Do not have carpets swept any oftener than is absolutely necessary. After dinner, sweep the crumbs onto a dusting-pan with your hearth-brush; and if you have been sewing, pick up the shreds by hand. A carpet can be kept very neat in this way; and a broom wears it very much." Then, as if the writer thought the children had any spare time, "After old coats, pantaloons, &c. have been cut up for boys, and are no longer capable of being converted into garments, cut them into strips and employ the leisure moments of children, or domestics, in sewing and braiding them for door-mats." After the children had sewn these carpet rags and tied them into one-pound balls, they were taken to the home of one who had a loom to be woven into carpets.

The days when people used home remedies to cure illnesses aren't as far back as they seem to most young people. My grandmother tells about curing dogwood poison with snakeroot and alcohol, and of course, everyone knows that skunk and goose grease are good for the croup and when one breaks bones. If children stuck a nail in their foot their father might chew a wad of tobacco and spit it on the wound to take out the poison. For aches and bruises balm-of-gilead and New England rum were mixed together and used as a soothing ointment. For curing cancer the book says to make a strong potash of lye from the ashes of red oak bark, boiled down to the consistency of molasses. Cover the cancer with this and about half an hour later cover with a plaster of tar. Remove this in a few days. Simple!

If that sounds bad, try this one: "A spoonful of ashes stirred in cider is good to prevent sickness at the stomach. Black cherry-bark, barberry bark, mustard-seed, petty morrel-root, and horse-radish, well steeped in cider are excellent for the jaundice." For a tooth-ache we are advised to make a poultice of ginger or of common chickweed "that grows about one's door in the country." Here is one you might try: "An ointment made from the common ground-worms, which the boys dig to bait fishes, rubbed on with the hand, is said to be excellent, when the sinews are drawn up by any disease or accident."

In the choice of meats we read, "A bullock's heart is very profitable to use as a steak. Broiled just like beef. There are usually five pounds in a heart, and it can be bought for twenty-five cents. Some people stuff and roast it."

"Pig's head is a profitable thing to buy. It is despised, because it is cheap; but when well cooked it is delicious. Well cleaned, the tip of the snout chopped off, and put in brine a week, it is very good for boiling: the cheeks in particular, are very sweet; they are better than any other pieces of pork to bake with beans. The head is likewise very good baked about an hour and a half. It tastes like roast pork, and yields abundance of sweet fat, for shortening." In the section dealing with common cooking we find that in cooking calf's head "It is better to leave the wind-pipe on, for if it hangs out of the pot while the head is cooking, all the froth will escape through it. The brains, after being thoroughly washed, should be put in a little bag, with one pounded cracker, or as much crumbled bread, seasoned with sifted sage, and tied up and boiled one hour. After the brains are boiled, they should be well broken up with a knife, and peppered, salted, and buttered." Yummy!

Several chapters after advising us to mix ashes with cider for stomach aches they say, "If you find yourself really ill, send for a good physician. Have nothing to do with quacks; and do not tamper with quack medicines. You do not know what they are; and what security have you that they know what they are?" After taking ashes and cider and rubbing yourself with a worm ointment, I can understand that maybe a physician would have to be called.

All you travellers read this paragraph, and see what our author thought of it. "There is one kind of extravagance rapidly increasing in this country, which, in its effects on our purses and our habits, is one of the worst kinds of extravagance; I mean the rage for travelling, and for public amusements. The good old home habits of our ancestors are breaking up—it will be well if our virtue and our freedom do not follow them! And are not we becoming luxurious and idle? Look at our steam-boats, and stages, and taverns!" According to the author, "Travelling is cheap. So is staying at home."

Times certainly have changed, wouldn't you say? This book provides us with a rare look into the habits and activities of the housewife of 1830. I'll wager there's not a reader who is willing to trade places.

Richard S. Tripp — Editor